

IDOLS ARE NOT ‘YESTERDAY’

By John Gagliardi



In this highly secular and “progressive” 21st century, the ancient concept of idols seems anachronistic and irrelevant. So “yesterday”! And yet – consider the definition of an idol and how “yesterday” it really is: “An idol is ...any image or material object to which religious worship is addressed – any person or thing regarded with blind admiration, adoration or devotion.”

Sound familiar? Maybe today we don’t worship Baal or Ashtoreth, but what about money, our job or business, education, intellect, power, comfort and convenience, or even our family and children? These may all be good things, but if they become objects of “blind admiration, adoration or devotion”, they become in a very real sense “idols in our hearts”.

If any of these things obsess us, if they become so important in our lives that we can’t have peace and happiness without them, they become idols. God created us to worship Him, and Him only – He is a jealous God (Exodus 20: 5), and tells us over and over, “I alone am God ... Listen to Me, I alone am God, the First and the Last” (Isaiah 46: 9 and 48: 12).

If you wake up in the middle of the night, my fellow marketplace minister, and all you can think about is your business or your job; if you wake up in the morning and that is all that fills your thoughts, then you are dangerously close to having an idol in your heart. Because when you wake up in the night, and when you awaken in the morning, God should fill your heart and your mind, with an overwhelming sense of total trust in Him.

If you have anxiety and stress, fear and dread, it simply means God is not first in your life. Because God, who is Perfect Love, casts out all fear ... there is no fear in love (1 John 4: 18). Faith and fear are mutually exclusive – both cannot live within the same heart.

God Himself puts it this way: “How foolish are those who manufacture idols. These prized objects are really worthless. The people who worship idols don’t know this, so they are all put to shame ...

what fool would make his own god – an idol that cannot help him one bit? All who worship idols will be disgraced ... in terror and shame” (Isaiah 44: 9-11).

The Life Application Study Bible (NLT) notes: “We think of idols as statues of wood or stone, but in reality, an idol is anything natural that is given sacred value and power ... check out who or what you are worshipping”.

Historically, in Old Testament, the main “idols” were Bel (Marduk) and Nebo in Babylon, Baal and Ashtoreth in Canaan, Chemosh in Moab, Molech in Ammon and Dagon in Philistia. These idols represented everything from weather, war and education, to fertility, harvest and love. Pagan practices in worshipping these idols routinely included ritual prostitution and child sacrifice.

Today, we may not include prostitution and child sacrifice in our ritual observances but we can let ourselves slide very close to idolatry when we pursue anything that takes the place of God in our lives – when we put anything on a “pedestal” that is not God, we are trying to fill Blaise Pascal’s “God-shaped vacuum” in our heart with something that does not fit.

Tim Keller, pastor of New York’s Redeemer Church, recently set down a list of what he calls “idol-based lifestyles”, and some of them have an ominously familiar ring. They include power, approval, comfort, image, control, dependence/independence, work/business, achievement, materialism, religion/irreligion, race, culture, ideology, family, relationship and suffering.

Quite a list – but I am sure you can come up with many, many more as you think about your own life and attitudes. Pastor Keller says: “Dealing with the idols of the heart is an ongoing process. It is not ‘one and done’. We must always remember that the human heart is never neutral – it must worship something.

“And the heart is an idol factory constantly elevating and worshipping other things/people above God. Also we must always ask the ‘whys’ and ‘reasons’ behind our attitudes, actions and sin. What is the sin behind the sin? Too often I want to address only the symptoms and neglect the root cause.”

Chris Shipley in an article *Spiritual Idols and Addictions* puts it this way: “our rebellious attitude against God, whether manifested actively or passively, refuses to benefit in participating in our God-given purpose. Instead, we search for substitutes.

“We look for anything that will fill the hole left in our life because of our sin. These substitutes are what the Bible calls idols ... We were designed to worship God alone, but we have exchanged our God and Maker for idols.

“Even though God is to be the sole object of our worship, we constantly turn away from Him, forfeiting our God-given mandate and rebelliously begin to search for a new purpose in life. But still we find ourselves doing what we were designed to do – worship. Only now, the object of worship has changed – we have moved from green grass to mud puddles, from God to idols.

“idolatry is not a practice isolated to ancient cultures, but is also prevalent in our culture ... the thrill of drugs ... alcohol ... careers and occupations ... relationships ... in all these cases, something or someone is sought after, desired and idolized.

“The major problem is that what is being pursued was never meant to give unending joy, to take the place of God, in whom alone do we find unending joy, peace and satisfaction. Created things never substitute for the Creator.”

When we put our hand to the plough – when we obey our call to ministry in the marketplace – we need to be very aware of the dangers that lurk. As we begin to succeed and achieve, that very success can quickly become an end in itself, instead of a means to God’s end. Knowledge is power – and if we understand and are fully aware of the dangers, than we can be forearmed.

God called Gideon – a farmer who had no confidence in his own abilities – to save his nation from the Midianites. Although tremulous and doubting, Gideon ultimately believed God and obeyed the strategies God gave him (even if they did seem unusual).

But it is very significant that as soon as Gideon decided to trust and obey God, and after God had called him “a mighty hero” and told him to “go with the strength you have and rescue Israel from the Midianites” (Judges 6: 12 and 14), he was immediately commanded to destroy the idols around his life.

Idols tempt us away from God’s purpose, and lead to weakness and sin. God told Gideon: “Pull down your father’s altar to Baal, and cut down the Asherah pole standing beside it. Then build an altar to the Lord your God here on this hilltop sanctuary” (Judges 6: 25 and 26).

Tearing down the family’s pagan altars and idols was a major test of Gideon’s faith and obedience – it was a political as well as religious act, and took great courage and commitment. The LASB note says: “The Canaanite religion was very political, so an attack on a god was often seen as an attack on the local government supporting that god. Gideon would face serious social problems and probable physical attack ... Gideon took a great risk by following God’s higher law, which specifically forbids idol worship (Exodus 20: 1-5).”

Gideon physically tore down the idols around him and his family, but more importantly, his act of great courage in confronting Baal and Ashtoreth put down the idols of fear and inferiority in his heart. From being someone who was so fearful and anxious that he even hid in a winepress while he threshed his wheat, and described himself as the weakest and least in his clan (Judges 6: 15), Gideon is transformed by faith and obedience into a “mighty hero” indeed, defeating the Midianite hordes with only 300 men and ultimately being admitted to the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11 (Hebrews 11: 32).

We too can take heart from Gideon, an ordinary man called on by God to do extraordinary things. But like Gideon, before we can succeed in the “mighty exploits” for our God, be they in the marketplace or in the foreign mission field, in the home or in the local church, we will need to put down the idols in our heart, and replace them with the true and only object of our worship and adoration – our Holy Father, Lord God Almighty, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who was, and is, and is to come.